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ABSTRACT

This paper applies what is currently known about gay fathers to the more specific issues of the non-custodial gay father. Good parenting is not easy for any father, but being a successful gay father is even more difficult. Since the gay father is typically a non-custodial parent, he must deal with his grief about the loss of contact and quality time with his children. He must work to maintain healthy parent-child relationships while establishing, developing, and feeling proud of his gay identity. Homosexuality's stigma still affects gay fathers and their children and while the transition from the heterosexual to the gay world is not easy, the gay father can successfully accomplish this move. Psychologists should inform themselves on the issues these non-custodial fathers may present and be able to refer such fathers to community resources as well as provide information that gay fathers may need in the integration of their two identities. More research on this issue is needed. Questions such as how gay men adjust to life as a non-custodial parent after divorce and how this adjustment differs from that of the nongay father remain to be answered. (RJM)

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Non-Custodial Gay Fathers:

Considering the Issues

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Non-Custodial Gay Fathers:

Considering the Issues

Introduction

The term "gay father," while seeming contradictory, has taken on numerous meanings in the past two decades. Whereas fatherhood was once thought to be the exclusive right and privilege of the heterosexual male, gay men, their partners, and families of choice are redefining the constellation of the family. Increasing numbers of gay men are choosing to be fathers, either alone or with their partners or lovers, through foster parenting arrangements, adoption, or artificial insemination with a female friend or surrogate.

The majority of gay men who are fathers in the United States, however, have been (or are) involved in a heterosexual relationship or marriage that produced children. Because more of these men are choosing to "come out," and develop their gay identities, many of these relationships are ending in divorce and/or separation. In the majority of these cases, the mother is given custody of the children (both because custody is customarily given to the mother, and in some cases due to the myth that the father's homosexuality will somehow damage the children), resulting in most gay fathers becoming non-custodial parents.

The difficulty with discussing the issues of gay fathers is, as described above, the complexity and myriad of roles gay men take as fathers. The literature base in this area is sparse, attempting to study the issues of "gay fathers" as a homogeneous group. As a result, most reviews and empirical research have not differentiated between married, separated, divorced, partnered, and single gay fathers. Still, most of the subjects of research on gay fathers have been Caucasian men, who, as a result of their homosexuality, divorce their female partners and are, subsequently, non-custodial fathers. As a result, while all of the available literature could, and probably does, pertain to non-custodial gay fathers, it is also true that none of the literature specifically addresses the issues of non-custodial gay fathers.

This presentation will apply what is currently known about gay fathers to the more specific issues of the non-custodial gay

father. Following this review, a research agenda designed to produce more information about this aspect of gay fatherhood will be suggested. It is hoped that this presentation will be helpful to clinicians dealing with non-custodial gay fathers, either individually or in family settings, as well as researchers interested in furthering the knowledge about non-custodial gay fathers.

Considering the Issues of Non-Custodial Gay Fathers

The process of "coming out" appears to be more difficult for a man involved in a heterosexual marriage where children are present (Bozett, 1987; Miller, 1978). Often, men who are fathers beginning to explore their homosexuality feel the two roles (gay man and father) are incompatible. Fatherhood is a highly sanctioned role in society, while the opposite is true for the role of gay man (Bozett, 1987), making the decision to come out more difficult. Miller (1986, cited in Bozett, 1989) chronicled a four-point process he believes gay fathers experience in moving from the heterosexual world to the gay world and an integration of both the father and gay man roles. Covert Behavior, the first point on Miller's continuum, is the point at which these men begin to engage in sexual relationships with other men, and attempt to keep their sexual behaviors separate from their family life. These men typically do not identify themselves as gay, and do not perceive living as a gay man a viable alternative. In Marginal Involvement, the second point, these men begin to self-identify as gay, but their public identity remains heterosexual. They may be more involved in same-sex relationships, and feel increasing conflict about their gay man and father identities. They stay married, fearing ostracism, rejection, and permanent separation from their children. They tend to be unwilling to face a decreased standard of living associated with their coming out and potential divorce (Bozett, 1989).

The third point on Miller's continuum is Transformed Participation, in which men begin to accept and gradually express more of their public identity as gay. At this point they are most likely to come out to their wives and parents, but not to their children. They further their involvement in the gay community both sexually and emotionally.

The last continuum point is Open Endorsement, when the man's public and self-identity are as a gay man, and he becomes more

openly involved in the gay community. While this point may initially be expressed in gay separatism, over time these men are able to integrate their gay and nongay worlds. They come out to their children, and their network of friends and "family of choice" is increasingly in the gay community.

Miller's framework, although theoretical, helps us better understand what these men may be experiencing when they come for psychological treatment. They are dealing with the integration of two important identities: that of gay man and father. This is a difficult integration to negotiate, given the dissatisfaction the man feels with remaining in his heterosexual relationship, yet fearing rejection and stigmatization with coming out (Bozett, 1989). Given this difficulty, Miller points out that movement from Covert Behavior to Open Endorsement is not unilateral. There are many adjustments, negotiation points, and movements in and out of the closet. Miller found, however, that men who leave their wives and develop a more healthy gay identity voice a greater level of satisfaction as an "out" gay man compared to when they were heterosexually married. Despite having less regular contact with their children in a non-custodial parent role, the men studied by Miller reported increased salience in their role as father once leaving their marriages.

Providing information to the gay father seeking counseling can help him understand his own process of identity acceptance and negotiate the difficulties in coming out following heterosexual marriage. Education can contradict myths and stereotypes, and inform the client that a successful negotiation of his gay man and father roles is possible. The following information taken from the literature can aid in counseling the gay father to make appropriate decisions for himself and his family.

Bozett (1982) reports that in most marriages when the husband discloses his homosexuality to his wife, divorce is the usual outcome. While divorce itself is typically a traumatic experience for all involved, a divorce brought about by the father's increasingly public gay identity can present added difficulties. Bozett (1989) has found in his review of the literature that while some gay fathers may be relatively content in their marriages, most are not. Further, there is the question of when, how, and in what way to inform the children of the reasons for the divorce. Some children may experience difficulty adjusting to the father's new community of friends, partner(s),

and social activities, and will likely have questions or concerns about their father that may affect visits with him. Unfortunately, however, no study has specifically compared the trauma of divorce in which both members of the couple are heterosexual with couples in which one parent is gay or lesbian. Thus, there is no empirical data to suggest that divorces involving a homosexual parent are more or less traumatic than divorces in general. Barret and Robinson (1990) point out that the emotional distress of children with gay fathers is often solely attributed to the father's sexual orientation rather than viewed as a complex mixture of divorce traumas. Additional research is sorely needed in this area. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is added stress in the marital relationship with the wife's acceptance of the husband's developing gay identity, and concern over how to talk to the children about the divorce. However, there is also some suggestion that marriage break-ups involving a gay man are less conflictual and, in some cases, less divisive than marriages that break-up for other reasons, because these marriages may not have experienced ongoing and chronic marital discord. This contention must be supported with future research, however, before any formal conclusions can be drawn.

Still, fathers must weigh many factors with their wives in deciding to divorce. Psychologists must remember that the man, and the family, will be dealing with the more commonly observed effects of divorce as well as the unique aspect of the husband's/father's gay identity. As a result, children, mother, and father will be grieving the loss of the family unit, have to negotiate visitation schedules and financial support, and, if legal custody is shared, continue to make joint decisions about the children's welfare. The father's sexual orientation will have little to do with these aspects of the divorce. As psychologists, we must be careful not to ascribe these more "typical" consequences of divorce to the father's sexual orientation.

Gay fathers who have been studied in the literature are interested in keeping contact with their children, and work to maintain relationships with them (Bozett, 1980, 1989). Past research has often been biased in this direction, however, because samples have been taken from gay father support groups or coalitions. Those fathers who are interested in maintaining contact with their children often struggle with how, and in what

way to come out to their children, how to act with lovers and partners when the children are present, and to what extent to expose their children to the gay community. Research (e.g., Bozett, 1987) and anecdotal reports (e.g., Clark, 1979) suggest that a father's coming out has a generally positive effect on his relationship to the children, even though children may initially react with anger and confusion. Bozett (1987) reports that a father's coming out can, and often does, open up lines of communication and create closer father-child relationships.. In general, female children have been found to be more accepting of a father's homosexuality than have male children, although most children, regardless of gender, come to accept the father's homosexuality (Bozett, 1989). Even in those instances when the reaction is, and remains, negative, children rarely eliminate all contact with their fathers.

Binger and Bozett (1990) suggest guidelines for fathers coming out to their children. Most importantly, these authors recommend that the gay man/father come to terms with his own gay identity before disclosure. This helps the gay father establish his own sense of self, and be better able to adequately inform and answer children's questions about his homosexuality. Second, children are never too young or too old to be told of the father's gay identity. Research has suggested that younger children seem to be more accepting of their father's gay identity than older children, presumably because they have not yet fully internalized society's homonegative attitudes, and because they subsequently know their fathers longer as gay than "heterosexual" (Barret & Robinson, 1990). The disclosure should be planned, and the man should be prepared to answer questions from the children, not only at the time of disclosure but also at later periods. Other recommendations given by the authors include discussing the father's homosexuality before children know or suspect, disclosing in a quiet setting where interruptions are unlikely, and informing children that relationships with them will not change as a result of the disclosure (Binger & Bozett, 1990).

For men who have developed a healthy gay identity, and have been able to confront their internalized homonegative attitudes, coming out to their children is an important act. They want their children to know who they are, be able to meet their friends, and want to be open with romantic partners when the children are present (Bozett, 1987). While the fears and concerns of children who have gay fathers should not be

minimized, it is important for fathers to understand the consequences of not disclosing their gay identity to their children. Dunne (1987) suggests that not coming out to one's children results in an inability to achieve full integration of one's gay identity and public identity. The relationship with the child tends to be inauthentic, potentially resulting in a more distant father-child relationship. From a clinical standpoint, fathers may need assistance in knowing when to come out, and how the disclosure should be planned and conducted. It may not be practical for fathers to come out to their children if custody is an issue, although the realistic nature of this fear should be investigated before it is assumed that a custody battle will result from the father's disclosure.

Not surprisingly, research has found that fatherhood is not incompatible with being gay, and that a father's sexual orientation has no deleterious effects on the development of children (Bozett, 1989). When compared with nongay fathers, Scallen (1981) found that gay fathers were more endorsing of paternal nurturance, less endorsing of economic providing, and somewhat less traditional in their overall paternal attitudes. In addition, gay fathers demonstrated a significantly more positive self-assessment of their performance in the paternal role than did nongay fathers. Both gay and nongay fathers endorsed an active, caretaking stance regarding the parental role. Turner, Scadden, and Harris (1985), based on their research with gay fathers, concluded that most gay fathers have positive relationships with their children. The father's sexual orientation is of little importance in the overall parent/child relationship, and gay fathers try harder to create stable home lives and positive relationships with their children than one would expect from traditional heterosexual parents. In general, these authors reported that a father's sexual orientation is not the major issue in his relationships with his children. Further, children of gay fathers (and lesbian mothers) are no more likely to be gay or lesbian themselves, although this may be a common fear expressed by children. Research has repeatedly shown that no more than ten percent of children of gay and lesbian parents are gay or lesbian, no different than the often cited figure considered to be the proportion of the general public that is gay or lesbian (Bozett, 1986; Miller, 1979). Further, empirical research has not supported the stereotype that children are more likely to be sexually molested by their gay fathers, the gay

father's friends, or acquaintances (Bozett, 1989).

While not exclusively a gay disease, the issues of gay men cannot be discussed without some mention of the growing impact of AIDS on the gay community. Barret and Robinson (1990) discuss the potential influence of AIDS on gay fathers, commenting that no empirical research has investigated this issue. Whereas homosexuality itself can have a stigmatizing effect on children of gay fathers, the father having a terminal disease likely caused by sexual activity will be even more shameful to the child. In their "Tips for Practitioners," Barret and Robinson (1990) recommend that clinicians "confront their own discomforts and get their facts straight" (p. 136) in an effort to help children and families deal with the onset of HIV disease and AIDS in a loved one. Helping fathers make peace with their children, encouraging the children to visit, comfort, and reach out to their fathers, and helping family members deal with the loss of the loved one to AIDS are all important functions for the psychologist.

A Research Agenda

Several questions remain about the issues of non-custodial gay fathers, many of which could be answered with additional empirical research. As has been suggested during this presentation, investigation is needed into how the experience of divorce differs in families where one partner is gay or lesbian. An important question is how the trauma of divorce differs, if at all, in these families. Questions remain as to how gay men adjust to life as a non-custodial parent after divorce, and how this adjustment differs from that of the nongay father. How a gay father's relationship changes over time with his children when he is in a non-custodial role is also an important question. Other questions include: How do children adjust to their father having a romantic partner? Does this help or hinder the children's acceptance of their father? If a father's relationship has been long-standing, what effect does this have on the children? If the father's romantic relationship then dissolves, how are children affected? What arrangements are, or can be made, if the romantic partner of a gay father wants to continue a relationship with the children after a break-up? How might the experience of male and female children be different when a gay father divorces, and is now non-custodial? It is

hoped that these thoughts and questions can provide a spark for further study in this area.

Conclusion

Successful parenting is not easy for any father, but being a successful gay father is even more difficult (Barret & Robinson, 1990). As typically a non-custodial parent, the gay father must deal with his grief about the loss of quantity and quality time with his children, working to maintain healthy parent-child relationships with them, while establishing, developing and feeling proud of his gay identity. The stigma of homosexuality is real, and often encountered by gay fathers and their children. The transition from the heterosexual to the gay world is not easy for the gay father, but can be accomplished successfully. As practicing psychologists, it is important that we are not only knowledgeable of the issues these non-custodial fathers may present, but are also equipped to present them with information and community resources that will aid them in their journey to a healthy integration of these two important identities.

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